

# Cognitive Linguistics: basic concepts

## Lecture 5

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# 1. The cognitive basis of language



## Sign



a form which stands for something else, which we understand as its meaning

The relation between a sign and its meaning can be of three different kinds

*indexical \* iconic \* symbolic*

**Indexical signs** point to  
what they stand for

They “point” to a  
person’s internal  
emotional states of  
surprise or anger



*Emoticons*

# Iconic signs

- provide images of what they stand for
- An **iconic sign** is similar to the thing it represents



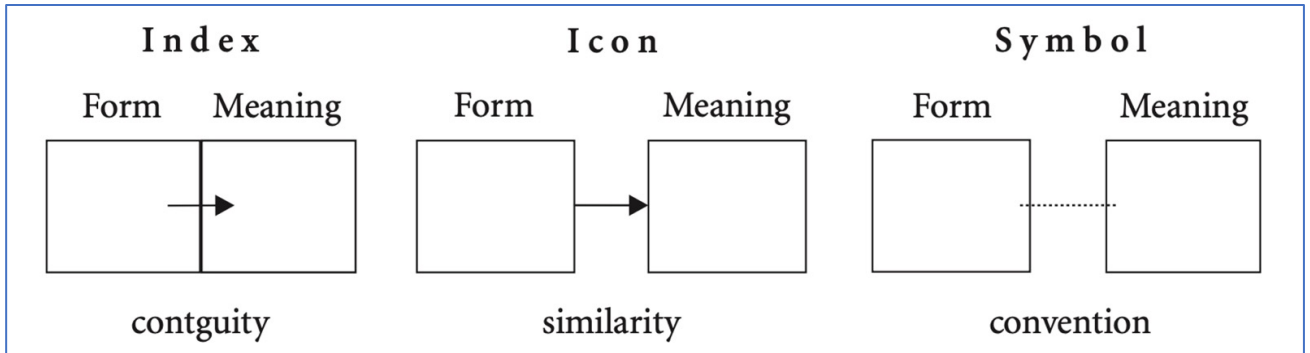


# Symbolic signs

involve a purely  
conventional  
relationship between  
the form of the sign and  
its meaning



# Links in the *three types of signs*



# 1. The principle of indexicality in language

This **egocentric** view of the world shows in our use  
of language.

*here, there, now, then, today, tomorrow, this, that,  
come, go, I, you, we*

**deictic expressions** relate to the speaking **ego**,  
who imposes his perspective on the world.

*The girl is in front of me.*

## 2. The principle of iconicity in language



Iconicity manifests itself in three sub-principles



*sequential order*



*distance*



*quantity*

## 2.1. The principle of sequential order

determines the order of two or more clauses

- *Veni, vidi, vici*



## 2.1. Sequential-order iconicity

the sentences have the same words but convey different meanings because of the different order of the adjective *blue*:

- *Paul painted the blue door.*
- *Paul painted the door blue.*



# *Binary* expressions ↻ reflect temporal succession

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*Now and then*

*Now and again*

*Rules and regulations*

*Now or never*

*Safe and sound*

*Sooner or later*

*Day and night*

*Law and order*

*Out and about*

## 2.2. The principle of distance

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things which **belong together conceptually** tend to be **put together** linguistically, and things that **do not belong together** are put **at a distance**

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a. *A noisy group was hanging around the bar.*

---

b. *A group of noisy youngsters were hanging around the bar.*



The principle of distance also accounts for the **types of subordinate clauses**

- *I made **her** leave.*
- *I wanted **her to** leave.*
- *I hoped **that she would** leave.*

## 2.3. The iconic principle of quantity

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accounts for the tendency to associate ***more form with more meaning*** and ***less form with less meaning***

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By stretching the o-sound of *long* as in  
***That's a looooong story***

---

iconically expresses the idea of an “*extremely long*” story



### 3. The principle of symbolicity in language

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the conventional pairing of form and meaning

- *house* in English
- *Haus* in German
- *huis* in Dutch
- *casa* in Italian and Spanish
- *maison* in French
- *talo* in Finnish
- *dom* in Russian

## 2. Cognitive linguistics and functionalism

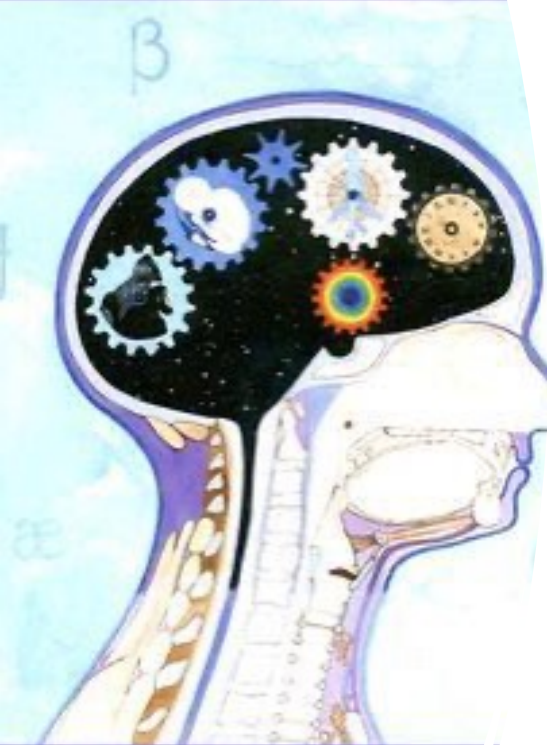
The general assumption behind *Cognitive Linguistics* is that language reflects patterns of thought.

Language offers a window into *cognitive function*, providing insights into the *nature, structure and organisation* of thoughts and ideas.

# Cognitive Linguistics

## An Introduction

Vyvyan Evans and Melanie Green



## Cognitive linguistics

emerged in the late 1970s out of dissatisfaction with formal approaches to language

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sees language as an *interactive part* of the *cognitive abilities of the human mind*:

perception, memory,  
attention, emotion,  
reasoning

In 1989/90

## *International Cognitive Linguistics Society*

- journal *Cognitive Linguistics*



**Ronald Langacker**

this *'marked the birth of cognitive linguistics as a broadly grounded, self-conscious intellectual movement'*

# *Cognitive linguistics* belongs to the functionalist tradition

## **The symbolic function**

language encodes and externalises our thoughts by using *symbols*

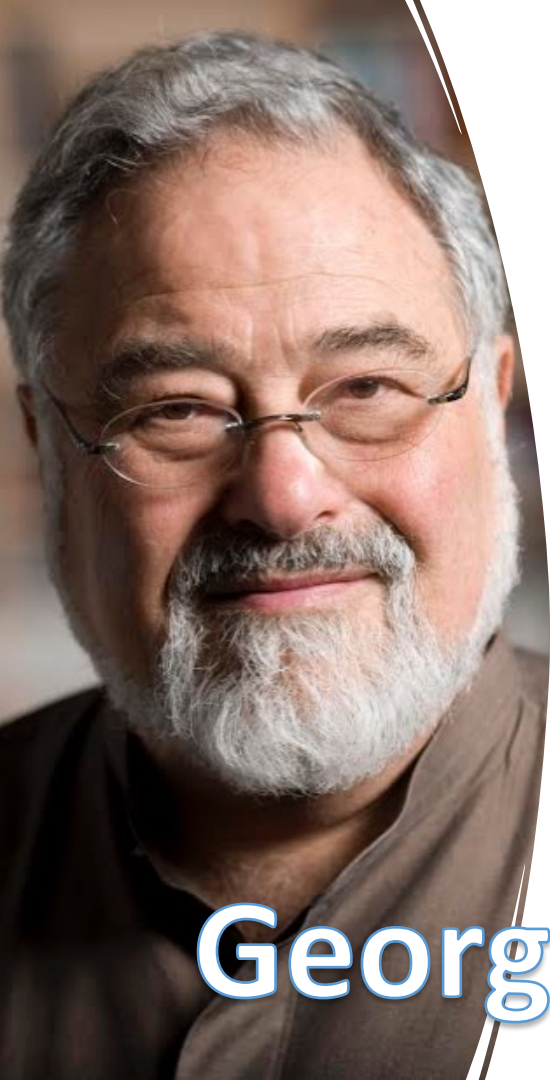
one of the functions of language is symbolise or *represent concepts*

## **The interactive function**

language serves an interactive function

It involves a process of transmission by the speaker, and decoding and interpretation by the hearer





### 3. Commitments of cognitive linguistics

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- 1. Generalization Commitment***
- 2. Cognitive Commitment***

**George Lakoff**





# 1. Generalization Commitment

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a commitment to the characterization of **general principles** that are responsible for all aspects of human language

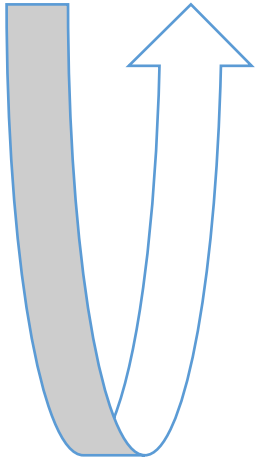
It means finding out whether there are **common structuring principles** that hold across different aspects of language and what they are.

Cognitive linguists argue that **polysemy** reveals important commonalities between lexical, morphological and syntactic organization.

over



## Polysemy in the lexicon



- The picture is **over** the sofa. ABOVE
- The picture is **over** the hole. COVERING
- The ball is **over** the wall. ON-THE-OTHER-SIDE-OF
- The government handed **over** power. TRANSFER
- She has a strange power **over** me. CONTROL



# Polysemy in morphology

agentive *-er* suffix

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- *teacher*
- *villager*
- *toaster*
- *best-seller*

functional  
ability or  
attribute



## 2. Cognitive Commitment

principles of linguistic structure should reflect what is known about **human cognition** from other disciplines

language and linguistic organization should reflect **general cognitive principles** rather than cognitive principles that are specific to language

# Attention: profiling in language

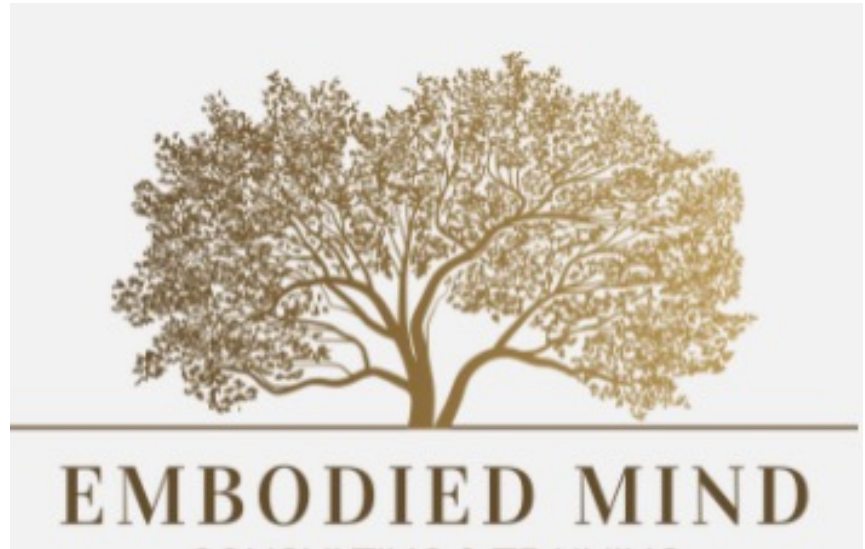


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- **The boy** kicks over the vase.
- **The vase** is kicked over.
- The vase **smashes into bits**.
- The vase is **in bits**.

## 4. The embodied mind

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# 4. The embodied mind

## rationalist view

it is possible to study language as a *formal system*, without taking into account the nature of human bodies or human experience

RENÉ  
DESCARTES



## empiricist view

human mind and language cannot be investigated in isolation from *human embodiment*

# 4.1. Embodied experience

- People have a specific view of the world due to the *unique nature of their physical bodies*.
- The construal of reality is mediated by the nature of our bodies.

- *Colour*



the human visual system has *three kinds* of colour channels



squirrels, rabbits : *two* colour channels



goldfish, pigeons : *four* colour channels



## 4.2. Embodied cognition

- The concepts we have access to and **the nature of the 'reality'** we think about are a **function of our embodiment**
- embodied experience manifests itself at the cognitive level in terms of *image schemas*
- **image schema** is a recurring structure within our cognitive processes which establishes patterns of understanding and reasoning

# THE BODY IN THE MIND

The Bodily Basis  
of Meaning,  
Imagination, and  
Reason

Mark Johnson

embodied  
concepts  
can be  
extended  
to provide  
more  
abstract  
concepts

# The CONTAINER image schema

containers are meaningful in our everyday  
experience

## conceptual projection

**LOVE** is structured in terms of a **CONTAINER**

- *She is in love.*
- *Roy is in trouble.*
- *The government is in a deep crisis.*



## 4.3. Experiential realism

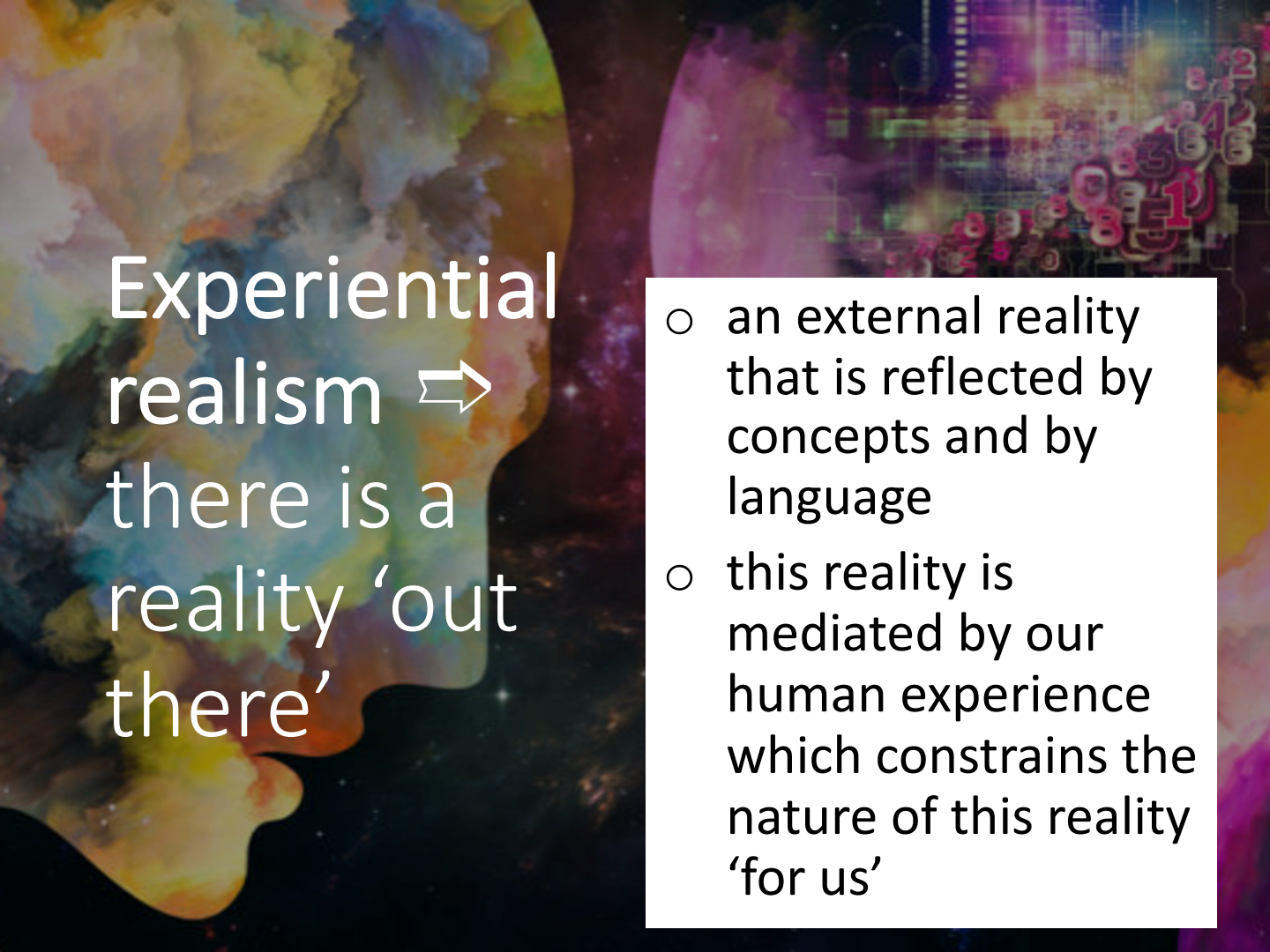
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Language does not directly reflect the world. It reflects human *construal of the world*

our 'world view' appears to us through the lens of our embodiment

*Ray Jackendoff :*

The human reality is 'projected reality'



Experiential  
realism ⇒  
there is a  
reality 'out  
there'

- an external reality that is reflected by concepts and by language
- this reality is mediated by our human experience which constrains the nature of this reality 'for us'

# 5. Linguistic and conceptual categories

Language resides, not in dictionaries, but in the minds of the speakers.

The notion of **concept** ⇨ *a person's idea of what something in the world is like*

concepts which slice reality into relevant units are called **categories**

**Conceptual categories** are concepts of a set as a whole:

MUSIC



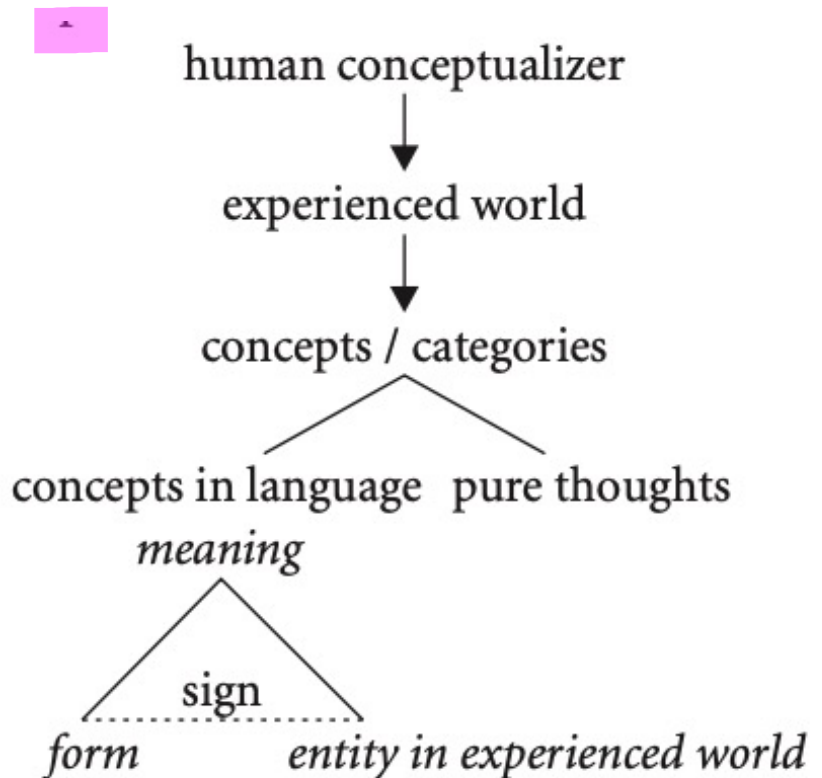
JAZZ

CLASSICAL

ROCK

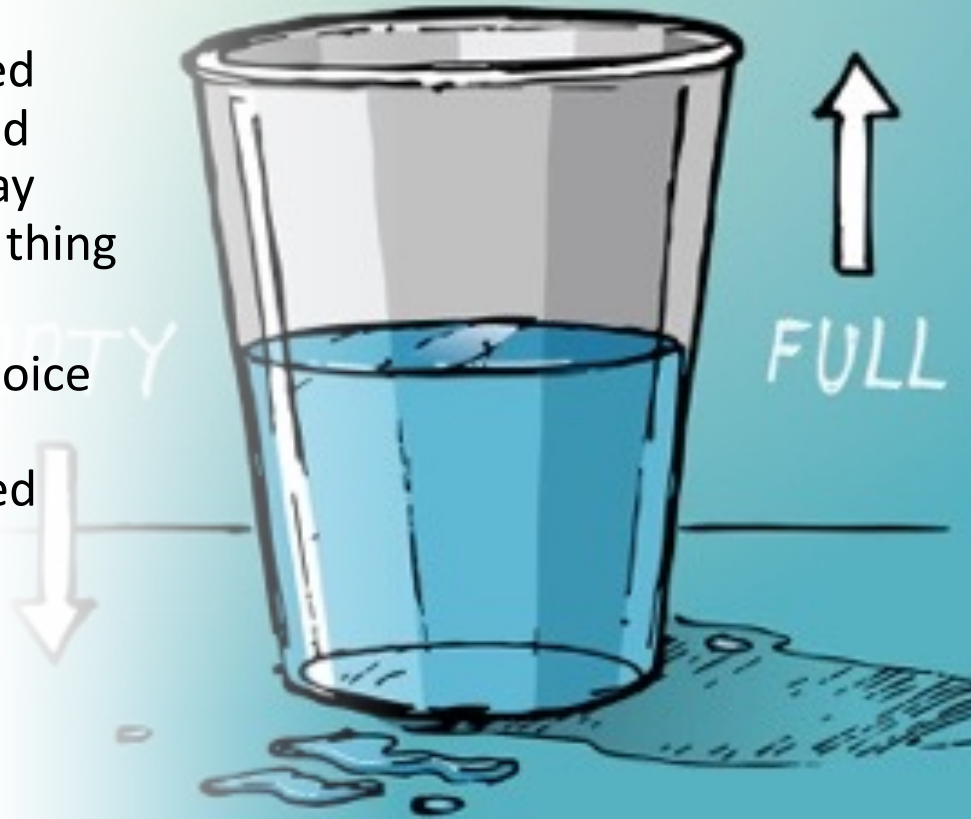


Model of  
the  
conceptual  
world

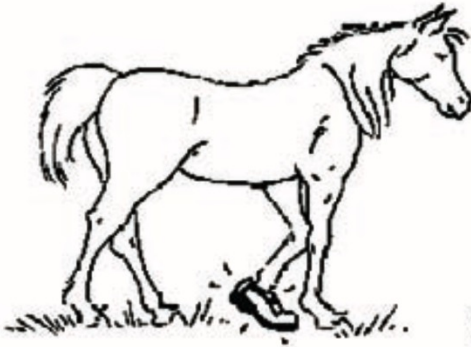




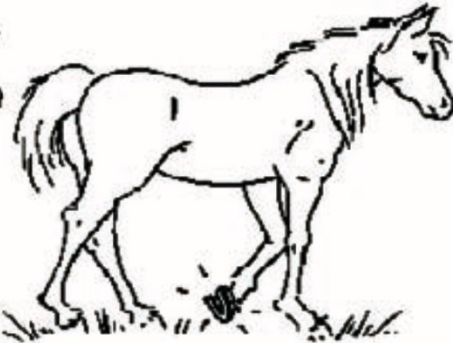
- One person may describe a half-filled glass as *half full* and another person may describe the same thing as *half empty*.
- Each person's choice between various alternatives is called **construal**.



*construal* in various languages



horseshoe




fer à cheval



Hufeisen

English construes	French	German
as horseshoe	fer à cheval	as Hufeisen
'shoe for horse'	'iron for horse'	'hoof iron'





lexical category *SNOW*

is construed as two different  
word classes :

as a **noun**

as a **verb**

Conceptual  
categories  
show up as  
grammatical  
categories

- *Look at that snow!*
- *It's snowing again.*

*Lexical categories are defined by their content,  
grammatical categories provide the structural  
framework for the lexical material.*

Lexical  
category  
*"chairs"*

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a. kitchen chair



b. rocking chair



c. swivel chair



d. armchair



e. wheelchair



f. highchair

The best member  $\Rightarrow$  the **prototypical member**

# Grammatical categories : *word classes*

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1	noun	<i>mother, bird, pleasure</i>
2	pronoun	<i>I, you, she, someone, which</i>
3	determiner	<i>the, a, this, two</i>
4	verb	<i>say, cry, consider</i>
5	adjective	<i>big, rich, happy</i>
6	adverb	<i>happily, merely, very</i>
7	preposition	<i>at, on, during, amongst</i>
8	particle	<i>(hang) up, (hand) in</i>
9	conjunction	<i>and, because, after, before</i>
10	interjection	<i>alas!, oops!, wow!</i>

# Word classes

## *Traditional definitions*

were based on the erroneous assumption that the **word classes are clearly definable** and **all the words of a language can be neatly grouped into one of them.**

## *Cognitive view*

**different types of words** are subsumed under a grammatical category.

The category **NOUN** subsumes disparate types of nouns

prototypical noun:  
denotes a concrete,  
physical thing

less prototypical:  
denotes a non-  
concrete entity

We needed a new *telephone*.  
We called the telephone *company*.  
They installed it in the *afternoon*.  
But they did a lousy *job*.  
I am amazed at their *stupidity*.

has no concrete  
existence

refers to an action  
and is more verb-  
like in its meaning

refers to a property and  
is more adjective-like in  
meaning

## 6. Cognitive semantics & cognitive grammar



**Cognitive semantics** is concerned with investigating the relationship between experience, the conceptual system and the semantic structure encoded by language.



investigates ***knowledge representation*** (conceptual structure) and ***meaning construction*** (conceptualisation)

# Cognitive approaches to grammar

encompass the inventory of linguistic units defined as  
*form-meaning pairings*

Meaning and grammar are seen as two sides of the same coin:



- to take a **cognitive approach to grammar** is to study the units of language and hence the language system itself
- to take a **cognitive approach to semantics** is to attempt to understand how this linguistic system relates to the conceptual system, which in turn relates to embodied experience

## ✓ Cognitive linguistics

The study of language in a way that is compatible with what is known about the human mind, treating language as reflecting and revealing the mind

## ✓ Cognitive semantics

The study of the relationship between experience, embodied cognition and language

## ✓ Cognitive approaches to grammar

The study of the symbolic linguistic units that comprise language



## 7. Cognitive grammar

**Cognitive Grammar** is based on the insight that grammar is the product of human cognition.

*Grammar is not only an integral part of cognition but also a key to understanding it [Langacker 2008: 4].*



## Basic assumptions

- 1. The grammar of a language is **part of human cognition** and **interacts with other cognitive faculties** (perception, attention, memory).
- 2. The grammar of a language **reflects generalizations** about phenomena in the world as the speakers experience them.
- 3. Forms of grammar are **meaningful** and **never “empty”** or meaningless.
- 4. The grammar of a language represents the whole of a **native speaker’s knowledge of** both **the lexical categories and the grammatical structures** of language.
- 5. The grammar of a language is **usage-based** in that it provides speakers with a variety of **structural options** to present their view of a given scene.

## Things, relations and conceptual cores

**Things** are **independent** conceptual units that are typically coded as **nouns**

Things → nouns



The most prototypical things relate to *physical objects* →



*laptops, tables*



Less prototypical things are *abstract units* → *bliss, prolixity*

**Relations** are **dependent** short-lived  
conceptual units

*Relations* ⇒ verbs, adjectives,  
adverbs, prepositions, conjunctions

flexibility between *things* and *relations* ➡  
multifunctional use of the word *thing*

- a. Let's not make a big *thing* out of it. [issue]
- b. Painting is an amazing *thing*. [experience]
- c. Do the wrong *thing* and you'll get it in the neck. [action]
- d. How are *things* today? [state of affairs]

# Conceptual cores

a relation combined with two or more conceptual entities participating in it

- The structure of the conceptual core is based on the principle of **figure** and **ground**
- one entity in a conceptual core is the figure, the other serves as the ground

- *Ann is fond of jazz music.*

[*Ann* – figure + *is fond of* – relation + *jazz music* – ground]

- *the goldfish in the pond.*

[*goldfish* – figure + *in* – relation + *pond* – ground]

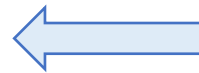
one conceptual entity  $\Rightarrow$  **FIGURE**

❖ *adjectives*

❖ *intransitive verbs*

do not require a ground to be expressed as a second entity

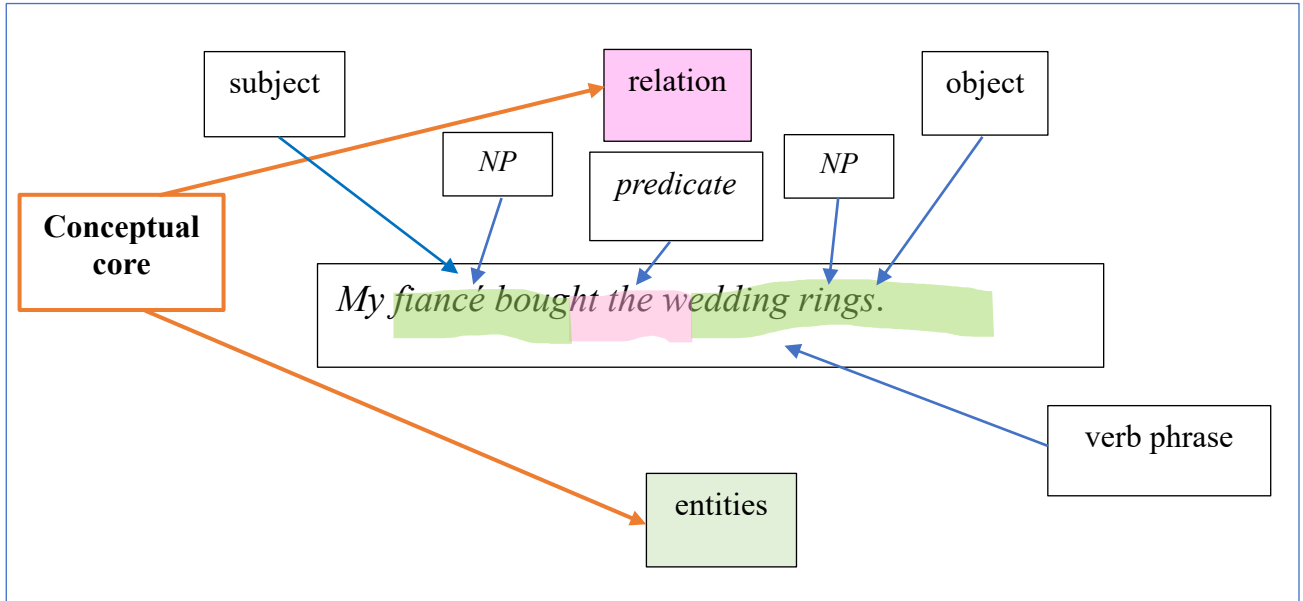
*Joanna is smart.*  
*The baby is sleeping.*



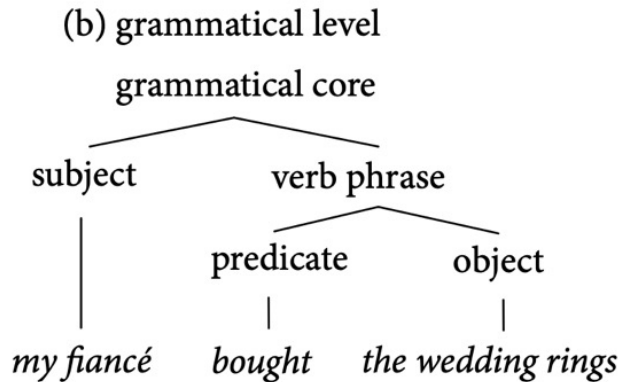
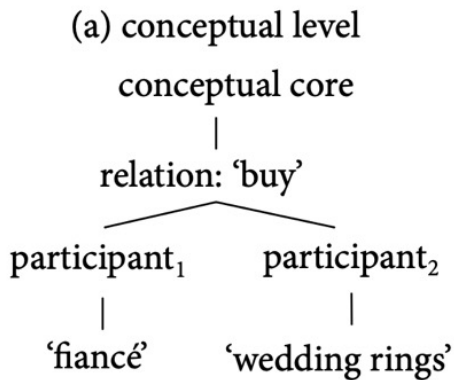
No  
ground  
entity

# Conceptual core: Grammatical core


*My fiancé bought the wedding rings.*







The **conceptual core** of a situation and the **grammatical core** of a sentence



## *Grounding: Grounding elements*

The term **ground** is used to indicate the speech event, its participants (*speaker and hearer*), their interaction, and the immediate circumstances (*time and place of speaking*).

In grounding a situation, the speaker provides information about

- **who** or **what** he is talking about
- **when** the situation happened in relation to the present moment
- whether it **really** happened

## Nominal grounding

✓ *the, this, that, some, a, each, every, no, any*

the speaker directs the hearer's attention to the intended discourse referent, which may or may not correspond to an actual individual

## Clausal grounding

✓ *s, -ed, may, will, should*

situates the profiled relationship with respect to the speaker's current conception of reality.

*My fiancé **bought the** wedding rings and **may** also buy a necklace.*

# *Setting: Setting elements*

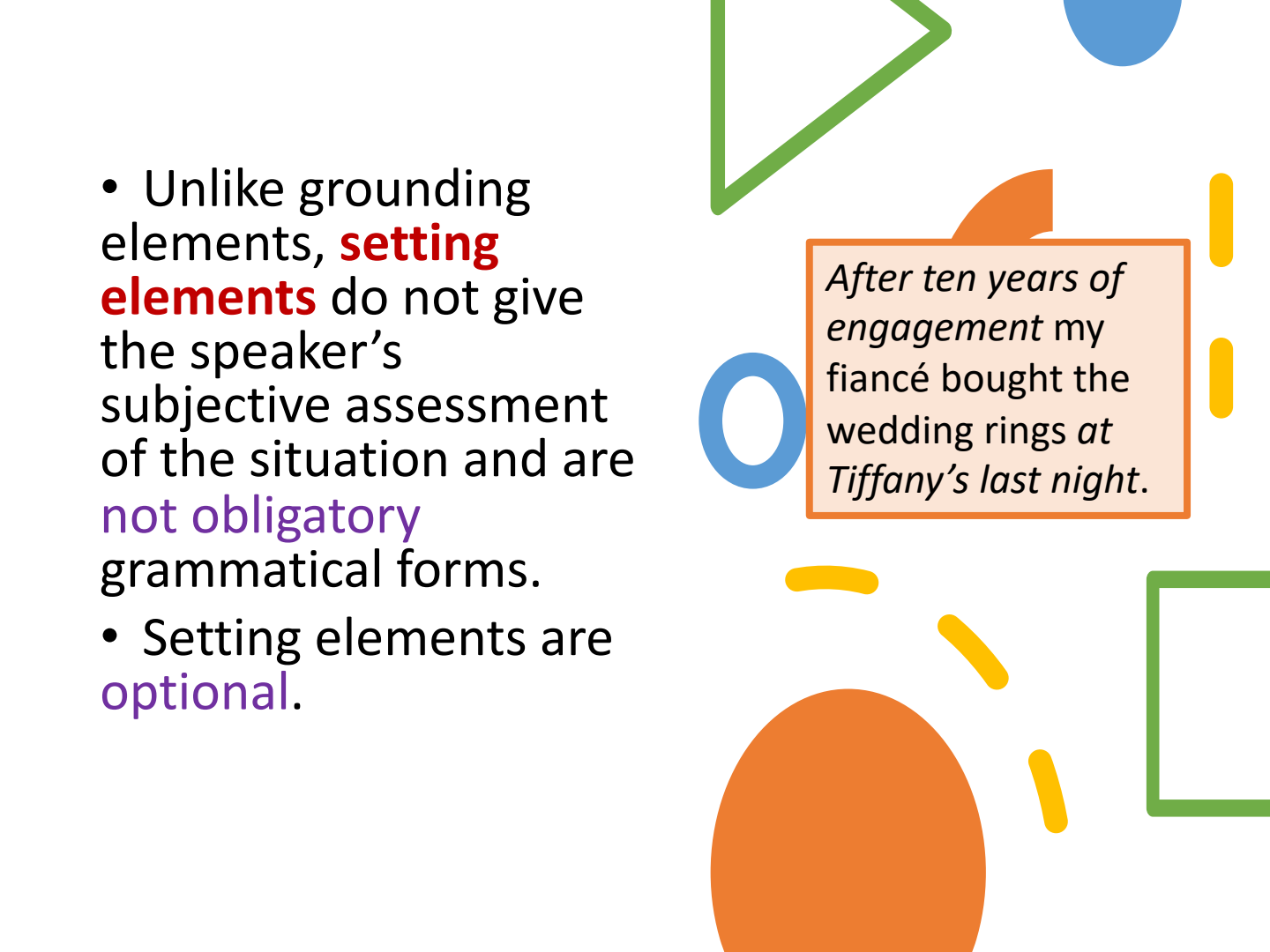
- **setting**

refers to the background against which a situation is set

**Setting elements** provide information

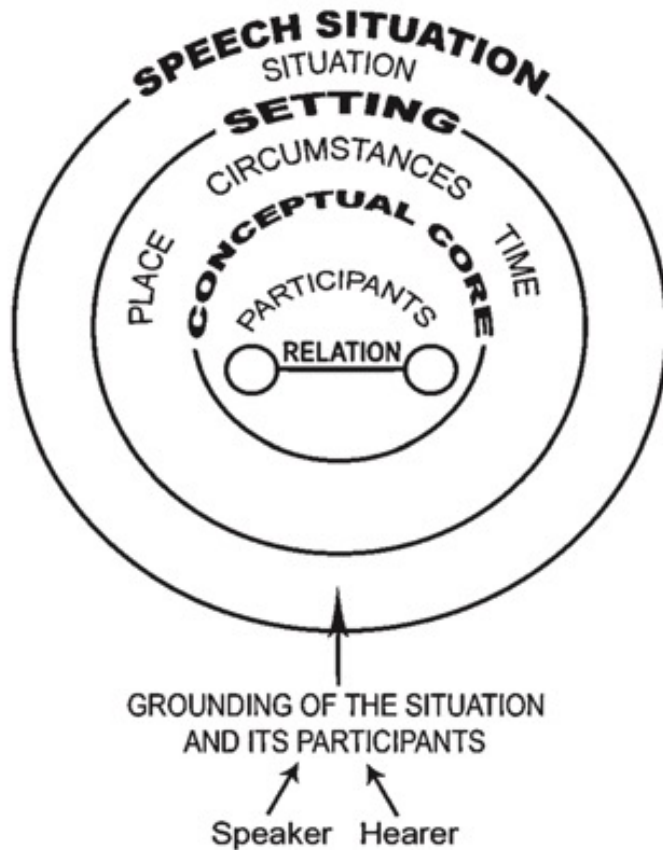
- **where** and **when** the event happened
- **why** it happened
- the **condition** under which it happened

- Unlike grounding elements, **setting elements** do not give the speaker's subjective assessment of the situation and are **not obligatory** grammatical forms.
- Setting elements are **optional**.

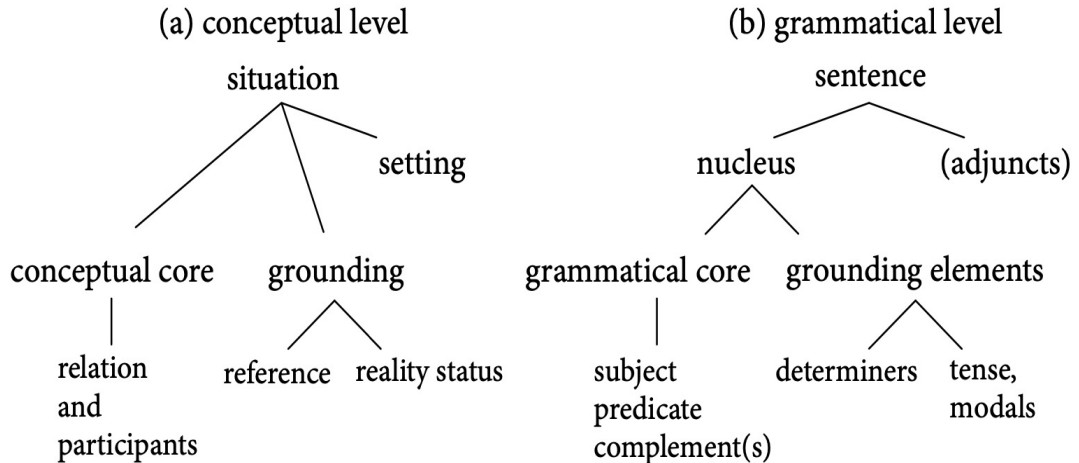


*After ten years of engagement my fiancé bought the wedding rings at Tiffany's last night.*

# *Structure of a situation*



# conceptual and grammatical units correspond



# Proposition

- that part of the meaning of a sentence or clause that is constant, irrespective of the form it takes
- My fiancé bought the wedding rings.*
- The wedding rings were bought by my fiancé.*
- Did my fiancé buy the wedding rings?*

the same proposition

**'my fiancé — buy — the wedding rings'**